



Rachel Bella Calof
Yiddish Autobiographer, Homesteader
1876 -1952
Devils Lake, North Dakota

Rachel Bella Kahn was born in Russia in 1876. Her mother died when Rachel was just four years old. She later lived with her grandfather and her aunt, and in 1894, at age eighteen, she traveled to the United States for an arranged marriage to Abraham Calof. Many of Calof's relatives had already come to America, and most of them had traveled to North Dakota to claim homestead lands. Feeling that homesteading was their best opportunity to succeed in America, Rachel and Abraham journeyed to the region near Devils Lake, North Dakota to become homesteaders. Over the next 23 years, she and her husband carved out a life for themselves on the North Dakota prairie. Rachel gave birth to nine children in harsh and primitive conditions, and despite several dangerous illnesses and accidents, all survived. Eventually she and her family became well known and respected throughout the area, and she and her husband were integral to the establishment of the first organized local school district. For this work, they received letters of commendation from Presidents William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson.

Eventually, the harsh living conditions and physical demands of homesteader life and numerous pregnancies took their toll on Rachel and Abraham Calof, and they moved to St. Paul, Minnesota in 1917. In 1936, Rachel began to record her autobiography in longhand in a standard writing tablet. Her handwritten memoir, entitled *My Story*, eventually made its way into the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio, where it was discovered in the early 1990s. It was edited and published as *Rachel Calof's Story* in 1995. It stands as an excellent history of a family's struggles, hardships, failures and successes on the vast American prairie. *Rachel Calof's Story* is a fine example of the difficulties endured by homesteaders and the ingenuity and strength of spirit that was required to succeed.

Rachel Bella Calof later moved to Washington state and died there in 1952 at age 76.